



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 10, 2016

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Secretary John A. Scocos Column: Memorial Day 2016

MADISON – On the most solemn of our nation’s veteran recognition days, Memorial Day, one is often reminded to take pause and reflect upon what the “ultimate sacrifice” means to this country and her people and especially to those individuals and families affected by the loss of a service member.

This day remains important because we still have warriors in the fight. The Afghanistan war is in its 14th year and has claimed the lives of more than 2,000 Americans. The Iraq war cost more than 4,000 lives. According to the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs, between Afghanistan and Iraq, Wisconsin has lost 126 service members. The United States is again in Iraq, this time battling ISIS, and this month lost its third service member in combat, a special operations sailor killed while fighting alongside Kurdish forces.

Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen from nearly every generation have answered when their nation called. Those who have been called have answered knowing they would be sent into harm’s way. Many of those brave warriors gave their lives in that call to arms, which is what sets this day apart from all other special days of recognition we observe for our military veterans.

While Veterans Day honors all who served, Memorial Day specifically honors our war dead, who deserve our utmost respect. First observed 150 years ago following the Civil War, this day has come to recognize all those great patriots who died in action in all armed conflicts. These brave men and women are the very reason we have America. Why America has remained free. Why America has been a symbol of strength. It is these things because of those who donned the uniform and served, sacrificed.

Most of the names of those who sacrificed their lives on our behalf are not listed in any history book and are largely unknown aside from their families or comrades-in-arms. Their individual names may be unknown to the masses, but their deeds and sacrifices on this day are recognized and remembered in ceremonies across our nation.

As the beneficiaries of their legacy, we must ensure that the achievements and sacrifices of those who served are never forgotten, which is why we gather to remember. Those who distinguished themselves on the battlefield started by simply answering the call to serve, but with their service left an indelible impression on those who knew them. On Memorial Day we ensure that their legacies are remembered.

Remembering those who have gone before us is why our nation has many state and federal veterans cemeteries, including three here in Wisconsin. These are the final resting places of millions of veterans, including many thousands who died in combat from the Revolutionary War to the present day conflicts in the Middle East.

Whether at a veterans cemetery or during other holiday weekend activities, take a moment and remember the reason for the long weekend – it was earned for us by those who selflessly sacrificed on our behalf.

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